

VZCZCXRO3748

PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSL RUEHSR
DE RUEHSI #2180/01 3451436
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 111436Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2595
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002180

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/09/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [LV](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: LATVIAN PRESIDENT OFFERS MISHA MORAL
SUPPORT

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION KENT LOGSDON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b)
AND (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Latvian President Valdis Zatlers, accompanied by his wife and 65 Latvian businessmen, paid an official visit to Georgia in early December. With the economies of both Latvia and Georgia struggling, the visit centered on shared possibilities for enhanced business relationships. Geopolitics and the influence of Russia in former Soviet states figured prominently in media reports. Latvian embassy representatives told us that President Zatlers delivered clear points to President Saakashvili on Latvia's willingness to support Georgia and share expertise, while ensuring that this "unwavering support" was balanced with a message that Georgia needed to "do its homework," closely follow EU guidance on international affairs, and be ready to counter with facts Russian statements to the international community. This visit continues President Saakashvili's efforts to build personal relationships with European leaders, while also doing everything he can to sell the opportunities present in the Georgian market to international investors. End Summary.

"Georgia's Place is in Europe"

¶2. (SBU) Latvian President Valdis Zatlers, following up an earlier 2009 visit to Baku, traveled again to the south Caucasus in early December, visiting Georgia December 7-9, prior to traveling onward to Armenia. Starting in Batumi and small towns in Ajara, President Zatlers, accompanied by cabinet members, his wife, and 65 Latvian businessmen, began the state visit with a clear demonstration of the importance economics will play in the bilateral relationship. Prior to arriving in Georgia, President Zatlers stated in an interview with Georgia Today that the highest priority of the trip would be to enhance the economic cooperation between the two nations. In the same article, Zatlers stressed his support for Georgian integration into the EU and NATO, emphasizing that "Georgia's place is in Europe," and he stated, in response to a question about who started the August 2008 war, that the issue was pointless to discuss since the entire war took place in Georgian territory.

Meetings and Medals

¶3. (SBU) In addition to the 65 Latvian businessmen, President Zatlers also included in the delegation to Georgia the Latvian Economic, Interior, and Environment ministers, as well as several senior foreign policy and economic advisors. After a brief courtesy call with President Saakashvili, The Latvians met Parliamentary Chairman Davit Bakradze, Prime Minister Nika Gilauri, Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria, as well as Autonomous Republic of Ajara government head Levan Varshalomidze during the stop in Batumi. Latvian Economics Minister Artis Kampara and Georgian Minister of Economic Development Zurab Pololikashvili signed an economic cooperation agreement in the field of information technology, and the respective minister of interiors signed a border

cooperation agreement. The state visit could not avoid the exchanging of presidential medals, with President Zatlers awarding the Cross of Recognition to Saakashvili, and President Saakashvili awarding the St. George's Order to Zatlers.

Business is Big

14. (C) Latvian Embassy Second Secretary and coordinator of the visit Raimonds Vingris told us that this visit was the natural next step for President Zatlers after what the Latvians perceived as a highly successful initial trip to the Caucasus when he visited Baku. Noting that Zatlers and Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev had built a strong personal bond during the state visit ("they genuinely like each other," according to Vingris) that directly led to concrete economic bilateral progress, the Latvian president was hoping to achieve similar results in Georgia and Armenia. Vingris stressed that economic growth was the highest priority for the Latvian MFA and its embassies overseas, and the focus of the visit to Georgia was opening up export markets for Latvian goods, as well as potentially identifying investment opportunities that would ultimately benefit the troubled Latvian economy.

But Don't Forget the Politics

15. (C) According to Vingris, first and most publicly, President Zatlers stressed repeatedly Latvia's support for Georgian integration into the EU and NATO. Publicly and privately, he also stressed Latvia's willingness to pass along its expertise in any way it could as Georgia navigated

TBILISI 00002180 002 OF 002

the difficult route to eventual EU/NATO membership, stressing that Latvia would lobby as much as it could to ensure eventual success. Vingris stated that President Zatlers more quietly emphasized the importance of Saakashvili supporting EU positions as it related to Russia and the south Caucasus, and ensure that Georgia "did its homework" in countering Russian efforts to shape public information and influence international organization opinions regarding Georgia-specific issues. Elaborating, he said that Georgia must always be prepared to immediately put forth factual evidence to rebut any charges the Russians made towards them.

State Visits to Georgia Remain Interesting Experiences

16. (C) Mr. Vingris also provided a few anecdotes about setting up and conducting the state visit that would be easily recognized by all who have worked with President Saakashvili's protocol staff. While exhausting, Vingris stated that he was eventually resigned to the fact that however things might have been planned, they would inevitably be changed, avoided, or completely forgotten as the event took place. An initial meet and greet upon President Zatlers' arrival into Tbilisi with President Saakashvili which had been planned as a quiet introduction without press turned into a media circus as dozens of reporters arrived at the location beforehand, and responded to Latvian challenges by stating that they had been invited by the president's staff. The formal meeting at the presidency with its previously-set seat locations and attendees was also unexpectedly changed, resulting in President Saakashvili moving chairs as the meeting began to get a spot closer to President Zatlers. In spite of these instances of exasperation, Vingris stressed that Saakashvili was highly personable and gracious towards President Zatlers, and the Latvian president left Georgia "all smiles."

17. (C) Comment: President Saakashvili continues to emphasize international investment for future economic growth in Georgia, and his ability to personally affect the situation remains one of Georgia's most potent weapons as it continues to strive for growth following the August 2008 war.

Baltic countries remain some of Georgia's most natural allies, both politically and economically, and it is clear that while Georgia recognizes the overriding importance of its alliance with the United States, it very much appreciates the opportunity to enhance and develop its bonds with other nations closer to home that share its aversion to Russian efforts to exert its influence. With nothing to lose and much to gain with enhanced cooperation with countries such as Latvia, Georgia stands to continue its outreach efforts, seeking to attract as much international investment as possible, while touting its positive reviews in the areas of anti-corruption and business friendliness. Latvia also provided welcome advice and guidance on how to further integrate into European structures, and Georgia will continue to take this advice going forward. End Comment.
BASS